

THE FALL OF THE DICTIONARY OF WEBSTER

LOUIS PHILLIPS

New York, New York

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when verbs hung oppressively low in their sentences, I had been passing through a singularly dreary tract, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening grew on, within view of the melancholy dictionary of Noah Webster. I know not how it was - but with the first glimpse of the first page, with its tiny sketches of an Aardvark (*Orycteropus capensis*) and an Aardwolf (*Proteles cristata*), the first done to 1/30th of scale and the second to 1/20th, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable, for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which

upon the mere binding, and the simple typographic features of the domain - upon the bleak essay on the History of the English Language - upon a few pages of new words - and upon the color-plates - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into every-day vocabulary - the hideous dropping off of the veil.

Bending closely over the tome, I at length drank in the hideous import of the words.

Not read it? - Yes, I have read it. Long - long - long - many minutes, many hours, many days I have read it - yet I dared not - oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! - I dared not speak! We have put the living language in a tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I heard and read and studied the words but dared not speak or write! And now tonight - ha-ha! The breaking of silence's door, and the death-cry of silence. Oh! Whither shall I send these feeble words? Have I not heard the footsteps of immortality upon the stairs?

While I gazed upon the listing of words, the fissure between thought and speech widened - there came a fierce breath of the imagination - the entire satellite of my mother tongue burst at once - my brain reeled as the words rushed one upon another, pun and palindrome and anagram, tumultuous sound like the voice of a thousand waters, for language is indeed the river that we are dipped into up to our heels. And then I closed the book sullenly and silently. The Fall of the Dictionary of Webster.